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MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

CLASSICAL ART

CLASSICAL CORRIDOR

GRAECO-ROMAN GLASS

XLII

CLASSICAL ART

Classical Corridor:
Graeco-Roman Glass

Department of Classical Art
Gallery Guide no. 13

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CLASSICAL ART.

Classical Corridor.

Ancient Glass.

Ancient glass may be conveniently grouped in three classes according to the method of its manufacture: (1) hand-made glass, (2) blown glass, and (3) glass formed in moulds. Until the invention of the blow-pipe in the second or first century B. C., glass vases were laboriously made by hand over a core of clay, which was later broken and removed. Such vases are small, opaque and variegated in color; from a very early period until about the fifth century B. C., Egypt was the source of supply; after that date the eastern Mediterranean countries, especially Phoenicia, manufactured glass in abundance. With the invention of the blow-pipe the glass industry rapidly expanded; from its first important center at Alexandria it spread throughout the Roman Empire to the east and west along the shores of the Mediterranean, and northward to Germany, Gaul and Britain. Increased facility of production so much reduced the cost of the finished article that glass vessels to a great extent replaced clay vases for daily household and toilet uses. Clear glass as well as richly colored opaque and translucent glass was employed in the new process in making dishes and vases of infinitely varied shape and often of large size. Vases of blown glass are usually plain; occasionally threads of glass are applied plastically to the surface; the favorite colors are shades of red, blue, amethyst, green, amber, black and opaque white.

From the first century B. C., jugs, bottles, cups, tumblers, bowls and other vessels with more or less elaborate relief decoration were formed by blowing glass into moulds; neck, foot and handles were added by hand. Moulded vases are often shaped like human heads, animals, fishes or fruits.

Many specimens of ancient glass have acquired a beautiful iridescence, due to the decay of the surface caused by long exposure to dampness, for most of the glass, like the majority of clay vases preserved from antiquity, has been found in graves.

Case 1, north end of Corridor.

Blown glass from Syria, chiefly from excavations in the Hauran.

Gift of Mrs. W. Scott Fitz.

Most of these vases are made of glass which originally was almost colorless or slightly greenish in tint, a characteristic which distinguishes glass manufactured in Syria from the greenish blue of Egyptian glass, and from the green or olive coloring of Gallic and Rhenish varieties. On the third shelf is a vase of brown glass with a series of loops connecting lip and shoulder; also one of amethyst color. The double vases (top and bottom shelves), with a handle like a bail arched over the top, are the so-called lekythoi, common in Syrian graves of the fourth century A. D. (compare other examples in Cases 2 and 5); they are found also in France and along the Rhine. The two tall tubular vases (top shelf), swelling out in the middle and ending in a bulb at the bottom, belong to the numerous class popularly known as Balsamaria or perfume-bottles. The small oinochoë (second shelf), or pitcher with trefoil mouth, copies a shape frequent among Greek clay vases. By pressing a wooden instrument against the glass bubble while it was being blown, grooves or indentations were produced, like those on the pear-shaped body of the vase with a tall neck (top shelf). Another method of decorating is illustrated by the spherical vase (second shelf) with knobs or spikes on the surface picked out with a pair of pincers while the glass was hot. A characteristic of vases made in Syria is that the neck, as a rule, is sharply set off from the body.

Wall case 2.

Blown glass, chiefly from Phoenicia and Cyprus.

Pliny ascribes the invention of glass to the Phoenicians, and records an anecdote of its accidental discovery by stranded sailors who built a fire on the sandy shore of the river Belus to prepare a meal, and not finding stones at hand placed lumps of saltpeter from the cargo of their boat under their cooking-pot. The action of the heat fused the saltpeter and sand into glass. In spite of evident improbability, this account was credited throughout antiquity, and until recent times the Phoenician fabric was regarded as the

oldest and most celebrated class of ancient glass. Modern investigations in Phoenicia, however, have revealed no traces of local glass manufacture earlier than the fifth century B. C. Previous to that time Egypt was the source of supply. Sidon and Tyre were the greatest Phoenician centers of the industry and flourished especially during the Roman Imperial Period. The finest Sidonian glass was made by Greeks who not infrequently inscribed their name or some phrase in Greek on their work. As late as the twelfth century A. D. glass was still made in abundance at Tyre; the industry at this time was almost wholly in the hands of the Jews. Especially to be noted in Case 2 (top shelf) is the large Phoenician bottle of greenish glass with canteen-shaped body and cylindrical neck, decorated with zig-zags and loops on each side; the vase has acquired a striking silvery and blue iridescence. A small bowl from Crete (bottom shelf, center) of clear watery green color, shows the original appearance of such glass.

Case 3.

Blown glass from the eastern Mediterranean region, chiefly from Crete, Cyprus and Phoenicia.

The specimens of dark green, blue and purple glass in this case reveal the attractive colors obtained by the use of iron and copper oxides.

The large amphora (two-handled jar) with cover (bottom shelf) is a perfectly preserved example of a special class of cinerary urns in general use from the first to the third century A. D. in Northern Africa, Spain, Italy, Germany, Gaul and Brittany, but not in Greece, Egypt and the Orient. In the third century A. D., when burial began to take the place of cremation, the production of these urns gradually ceased.

A small ball-shaped aryballos (top shelf) has a handle of bronze attached by a ring of bronze wire to a loop of glass on each side of the vase. Among Corinthian vases of terra-cotta this shape is especially common.

Case 4.

Blown glass and moulded glass from Crete, Cyprus and Phoenicia.

Among the vases of blown glass in this case are two tall jugs from Crete (top and bottom shelves) of thick green fabric each having eight incised lines around the body. A small amphora of dark purple glass (third shelf) has an elongated pear-shaped body of exceptionally regular outline. Regularity of outline in vases made with the aid of the blow-pipe alone depended entirely on the dexterity and care of the worker; more perfect symmetry of shape and greater variety of decoration resulted from blowing a bubble of glass into a mould made in two parts which could be easily separated after the vase was formed. The process of moulding glass is illustrated in this case by a cup of white glass (second shelf) with silvery blue and green iridescence, decorated in relief with an ivy spray; by a bottle of amber-colored glass with fluted sides (third shelf) and by a vase of yellow glass (third shelf) the body of which resembles a bunch of grapes. The neck and handles of the bottle and the neck of the vase were added by hand after the mould had been removed.

Wall Case 5.

Blown glass and moulded glass, chiefly from the region of the Eastern Mediterranean.

In this case are exhibited examples of characteristic shapes and colors. The vases on the middle shelf form a collection given in the name of M. Elizabeth Carter.

On the bottom shelf are two small ointment vases of yellowish brown glass moulded to imitate dried dates with wrinkled skin. On the same shelf is a bearded head of opaque glass, archaic in style, worn as a pendant to a necklace. It is probably of Phoenician origin, though similar beads in the form of grotesque heads are found in Egypt in graves of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. The flesh is white, the hair and beard greenish blue; the curls over the forehead and the eyebrows, dark blue; the lips and earrings yellow. The large circular shallow dish of greenish glass (bottom shelf, center) was found in the vicinity of Tyre.

Case 6. Top Shelf.

Specimens of variegated opaque glass vases modelled by hand over a core.

The origin of this ware is traced to Egypt, where glass was invented sometime during the fourth millenium B. C. The centuries between 1500 and 600 B. C. mark the most flourishing period of the Egyptian industry. After the fifth century B. C., Phoenicia was an important center of production. This fabric continued to be popular in late Greek and Roman times. These hand-made vases of all periods are small, opaque and variegated in color; they were built up over a core of clay which was finally broken and shaken out. While the material was still hot, threads of blue, green, yellow or white glass were applied to the surface and worked into the vase by rolling, after which different patterns such as waves, zig-zags or chevrons were formed by drawing the surface in different directions with a pointed tool. Vases of this technique found throughout Greek lands and in Etruria in graves dating from the sixth to the third century B. C. were clearly regarded as objects of especial value. (Compare the small glass alabastron found with silver vases and gold jewelry in an Etruscan sarcophagus of the third century B. C. exhibited at the east end of the Classical Court on the ground floor.) They differ in form from the early Egyptian ware, for the most part copying in miniature shapes common among Greek terracotta vases, the spherical aryballos, the alabastron, the amphora and the oinochoë. It is possible that some were local imitations of the Egyptian fabric, but more probably they were all imported from Egypt and Phoenicia. Vases of this class made in Hellenistic and Roman times are inferior in shape and coloring, and often have fantastic handles (compare the two amphora-shaped bottles with dark blue, yellow and white chevrons).

Second Shelf.

A moulded tumbler of green glass bears the inscription:
"Let the buyer remember", which probably belongs to the same class of admonitions as that which decorates a silver drinking cup from Bosco Reale, "Enjoy thyself while alive, for tomorrow is uncertain." These glass cups with inscriptions date from the first century B. C. to the first century A. D.; most of them were made at Sidon, some in Italy.

Third Shelf.

During the late Greek and Roman periods glass pastes of remarkably luminous quality were frequently employed in making copies of engraved gems (compare Case 7, section 1, Late Greek Room); the cameo technique was also imitated in glass both for gems and for cups and vases of great beauty. The most celebrated example of this ware is the Portland Vase in the British Museum; a layer of opaque white was applied over dark blue glass, and the design was made to stand out in relief against the contrasting background by cutting through the outer layer. Infinite skill and patience were expended in adapting this technique to such a fragile material as glass. Two fragments of cameo glass are exhibited on the third shelf. The design on both is in opaque white against a dark blue ground. One is part of a flat, narrow band intended as an inlay; the design shows Herakles, who has just let fly an arrow at the Keryneian hind. On the other fragment, broken from a vase, appear the head and shoulders of a woman, seen from behind; she is reclining and extending a wine-cup upward to the right, where the hand of another figure reaches down to take the cup. The group becomes clear when compared with a glass paste gem in the Fourth Century Room (Case 7, Section 2, Row 3, No. 3).

A small circular disc of dark blue over white glass has an inlaid design of bright green acanthus leaves outlined with fine gold wire.

A box with a cover, said to be from Athens and possibly of Greek manufacture, is covered with variegated undulating lines of blue, green, white and gold.

The small octagonal amphora with pointed bottom is not of glass; it is cut from rock crystal; the execution of both the interior and the exterior is so perfect as to give no suggestion of its difficulty.

Among the most beautiful glass vases preserved from antiquity is a series of bowls made in Italy and the Orient during the first century A. D., which present the appearance of mosaics. The process of manufacture is revealed by the fractured edges of a large fragment on the bottom shelf; slender stalks of glass of various colors arranged in a pattern were fused together or thin plates of glass were dipped into molten glass of different colors and then rolled into a rod; transverse or longitudinal sections cut from these rods and repeating the same design were set in a mould and united by the action of heat. When held against the light the colors are seen to best advantage and justify the name millefiori, "a thousand flowers", given

to this ware by the Venetians of the Renaissance. Several especially fine examples of millefiori bowls are exhibited on the two lower shelves.